UN IN BRIEF

Published by the United Nations Department of Public Information
DPI/1223—September 1992—30M

HOW THE UN WORKS

The UN is an organization of sovereign nations—not a world government. It provides the machinery to help find solutions to disputes or problems, and to deal with virtually any matter of concern to humanity.

It does not legislate like a national parliament. But in the meeting rooms and corridors of the UN, representatives of almost all countries of the world—large and small, rich and poor, with varying political views and social systems—have a voice and vote in shaping the policies of the international community.

The UN has six main organs, listed below. All are based at UN Headquarters in New York, except the International Court of Justice, which is located at The Hague, Netherlands.

The General Assembly

The General Assembly, sometimes called the nearest thing to a world parliament, is the main deliberative body. All Member States are represented in it, and each has one vote. Decisions on ordinary matters are taken by simple majority. Important questions require two thirds of the vote.

The Assembly holds its regular sessions from mid-September to mid-December; special or emergency sessions are held when necessary. Even when the Assembly is not in session, its work goes on in special committees and bodies.

The Assembly has the right to discuss and make recommendations on all matters within the scope of the UN Charter. It has no power to compel action by any Government, but its recommendations carry the weight of world opinion. The Assembly also sets policies and determines programmes for the UN Secretariat. It sets goals and directs activities for development... calls for world conferences on major issues... and designates international years to focus attention on specific topics. Occupying a central position in the UN, the Assembly receives reports from other organs, admits new Members, approves the budget and appoints the UN Secretary-General.

UN Photo 179195/M. Grant

The Security Council

The UN Charter—an international treaty—obligates States to settle their international disputes by peaceful means. They are to refrain from the threat or use of force against any other State, and may bring any dispute before the Security Council.

The Council is the organ to which the Charter gives primary responsibility for maintaining peace and security. It can be convened at any time, whenever peace is threatened. Member States are obligated to carry out its decisions.

The Council has 15 members. Five of these—China, France, the Russian Federation,[1] the United Kingdom and the United States—are permanent members. The other 10 are elected by the Assembly for two-year terms. Decisions require nine votes; except in votes on procedural questions, a decision cannot be taken if there is a "no" vote by a permanent member (known as the "veto").

When a threat to peace is brought before the Council, it usually first asks the parties to reach agreement by peaceful means. The Council may undertake mediation or set forth principles for a settlement. It may request the Secretary-General to investigate and report on a situation. If fighting breaks out, the Council tries to secure a cease-fire. It may send peace-keeping units (observers or troops) to troubled areas, with the consent of the parties involved, to reduce tension and keep opposing forces apart. It has the power to enforce its decisions by imposing economic sanctions and by ordering collective military action.

The Council also makes recommendations to the Assembly on a candidate for Secretary-General and on the admission of new Members to the UN.

The Economic and Social Council

Working under the authority of the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council coordinates the economic and social work of the UN and related specialized agencies and institutions—known as the UN family of organizations. The Council has 54 members. It usually holds two month-long sessions each year.

The Council recommends and directs activities aimed at, among other things, promoting economic growth of developing countries... administering development and humanitarian assistance projects... promoting the observance of human rights... ending discrimination against minorities... spreading the benefits of science and technology... and fostering world cooperation in areas such as better housing, family planning and crime prevention.

The Trusteeship Council

The Trusteeship Council was established to ensure that Governments responsible for the administration of Trust Territories take adequate steps to prepare them for self-government or independence. It is the only organ whose activities have diminished over the years. The aims of the Trusteeship System have been accomplished to such an extent that of the original 11 Trusteeships only Palau, in the Pacific Islands, administered by the United States, now remains. All other Trust Territories have attained self-government or independence, either as separate States or by joining neighbouring independent countries. The Trusteeship Council is made up of the five permanent members of the Security Council.

The International Court of Justice

The International Court of Justice (also known as the World Court) is the main judicial organ of the UN. It consists of 15 judges elected by the General Assembly and the Security Council. Only countries may be parties in cases brought before the Court. If a country does not wish to take part in a proceeding it does not have to do so (unless required by special treaty provisions), but if it accepts, it is obligated to comply with the Court's decision.

UN Photo 175699/J. Isaac

[1]On 24 December 1991, the UN was informed that the Russian Federation would continue the membership of the former Soviet Union in the Security Council.

UN Photo 157588/S. Johansen

The Secretariat

The Secretariat works for the other organs of the UN and administers their programmes. Made up of an international staff working at Headquarters and all over the world, it carries out the day-to-day work of the UN. Staff members are drawn from some 160 countries. As international civil servants, they work for the UN as a whole, and pledge not to seek or receive instructions from any Government or outside authority.

At its head is the Secretary-General. Exercising one of his main functions, he may bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which, in his opinion, threatens international peace and security.

WHAT THE UN DOES FOR PEACE...

The main purpose of the UN is to preserve world peace. The UN has been active in helping to resolve disputes between nations, reduce tensions, prevent conflicts, and put an end to fighting. It has played a major role in resolving some of the most protracted conflicts of the last decade.

The means are varied: a Security Council decision ordering a cease-fire and laying down guidelines for settling a dispute... a compromise worked out by a mediator... unpublicized diplomatic approaches during informal encounters... exercise of the good offices of the Secretary-General... dispatch of a fact-finding team... observer missions or peace-keeping forces made up of contingents from Member States under the command of the UN.

In 1992, more than 45,000 UN peace-keepers and observers, provided by some 60 countries, are expected to be deployed in various areas of the world. More than 500,000 people—mostly military personnel, but also civilians—have served with the UN forces, and more than 790 peace-keepers have lost their lives.

... in Iran and Iraq

The UN was instrumental in ending the war between Iran and Iraq. UN efforts ultimately led to a cease-fire in August 1988. During the eight years of the conflict, the Secretary-General made every effort to find a political solution, and to mitigate the effects of the war—reaching interim agreements to stop attacks on cities, halt the use of chemical weapons and ensure humane treatment of prisoners of war. The Security Council set out in 1987 a plan to end the war. Following intensive diplomatic efforts by the Secretary-General, the two countries accepted the UN plan in August 1988. After the cease-fire, some 400 UN military observers, known as the UN Iran-Iraq Military Observer Group (UNIIMOG), were deployed between the two opposing armies to supervise the end of the hostilities and troop withdrawal. UNIIMOG completed its task in February 1991.

...in Afghanistan

The UN played a similar peace-making role in Afghanistan. In April 1988, representatives of Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Soviet Union and the United States signed in Geneva the Agreements that opened the way for a settlement of the conflict. The Agreements were the result of six years of complex negotiations conducted by a Personal Representative of the Secretary-General. They covered the withdrawal of Soviet troops, the voluntary return of refugees, non-interference and non-intervention, and international guarantees by the Soviet Union and the United States.

To verify compliance with the Agreements, the UN deployed the observers of the UN Good Offices Mission in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Troop withdrawal was completed on schedule in 1989, thus fulfilling the Mission's task. The Office of the Secretary-General in Afghanistan and Pakistan is working to reach a political settlement acceptable to the vast majority of the Afghan people.

...in Central America

The UN has helped steer the conflicts in Central America towards a solution. The UN Observer Group in Central America (ONUCA), in place between 1989 and 1992, monitored security commitments undertaken by five Central American countries. It also played a role in the demobilization of some 22,000 members of the Nicaraguan resistance (also known as "contras"), who in March-June 1990 turned in their weapons to ONUCA.

At the request of the Government of El Salvador and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in 1989, the Secretary-General began assisting in the talks aimed at ending the conflict in El Salvador. A complex negotiation process led to the signing in January 1992 of a peace agreement between the Government and FMLN, which put an end to 12 years of conflict and opened up the path towards national reconciliation and a just and lasting peace. The UN Observer Mission in El Salvador is in place to monitor all agreements concluded between the Government and FMLN.

...in Cambodia

The UN has helped reach an agreement aimed at ending the conflict in Cambodia. To find a peaceful solution, the Secretary-General over the years maintained contacts with the parties involved, and in 1988 presented proposals for a comprehensive political settlement. Negotiations intensified, and in 1990 the five permanent members of the Security Council started high-level meetings to end the conflict. In October 1991, the Cambodia Agreements were signed—a peace treaty to end the 13-year war and prepare the country for elections. The Agreements assigned the UN an unprecedented role. The UN has set up an operation, the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia, to supervise the cease-fire, regroup and disarm all armed forces, and organize and conduct free and fair elections.

...in Yugoslavia

UN efforts also aim at resolving the conflict in Yugoslavia. In September 1991 the Security Council imposed a mandatory arms embargo, and asked the Secretary-General to assist in seeking a solution to the Yugoslav crisis. The Secretary-General got in touch with the parties involved, and appointed a Personal Envoy. In January 1992, under the auspices of the Personal Envoy, the parties signed an accord on the modalities for implementing a November 1991 cease-fire. To help restore peace, the UN has deployed a peace-keeping force—the UN Protection Force—of some 14,000 military, police and civilian personnel.

...in Angola, Cyprus and Kashmir

Observers of the UN Angola Verification Mission monitored, in accordance with a 1988 treaty between Angola and Cuba, the withdrawal of 50,000 Cuban troops from Angola, which was completed in 1991. A second UN Angola Verification Mission (UNAVEM II), now under way, is to verify the peace accords reached in May 1991 between the Government of Angola and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). UNAVEM II is monitoring compliance with the accords, and will verify elections scheduled for September 1992.

The UN Peace-keeping Force in Cyprus has been in place since 1964 to prevent fighting between the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities, preserve law and order and promote a return to normal conditions. UN-supported talks continue in search of a peaceful solution of the Cyprus problem.

The UN Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan has been stationed since 1949 in the State of Jammu and Kashmir to supervise the cease-fire line between Indian and Pakistani forces.

... in the Middle East

The Middle East has long been a major concern to the UN.

In 1948 a military observer group, the UN Truce Supervision Organization (UNTSO), was set up to monitor the truce called for by the Security Council during the first Arab-Israeli war. UNTSO's functions have evolved in the past four decades, but its military observers have remained in the area, helping to defuse tension.

A peace-keeping force, the UN Emergency Force, was created in 1956 at the time of the Suez crisis. It oversaw the withdrawal of British, French and Israeli troops and contributed to peace and stability in the region until it was withdrawn at Egypt's request in May 1967. After the 1973 war, two peace-keeping forces were dispatched to the Middle East. A second UN Emergency Force remained in the Sinai until 1979, when an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty was signed. The UN Disengagement Observer Force, deployed on the Golan Heights in 1974, maintains an area of separation there between Israeli and Syrian troops. The UN Interim Force in Lebanon, created in 1978, is in place

UN Photo 158084/J. Isaac

to confirm the withdrawal of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon, maintain international peace and security, and help restore the authority of the Lebanese Government.

Hand in hand with its peace-keeping activities, the UN has made continuous efforts to find a peaceful settlement in the Middle East. Security Council resolutions 242 (1967) and 338 (1973) set forth the principles for a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the region, and remain the basis for a settlement, taking into account the right to security for all States in the region, including Israel, and the legitimate political rights of the Palestinian people, including self-determination.

The Secretary-General's role

The Secretary-General plays an important role in peace-making, both personally and through Special Representatives or teams he appoints for specific purposes, such as negotiation or fact-finding. In addition to his actions in instances already mentioned, the Secretary-General was instrumental in averting a threat to peace during what was known as the Cuban missile crisis in 1962... in 1965 his Special Representative helped secure a cease-fire in the Dominican Republic... in 1988 the Secretary-General and the head of the Organization of African Unity proposed a peace plan for Western Sahara, which led to the cease-fire of September 1991 in that Territory.

UN Photo 179234/M. Grant

Disarmament

Halting the arms race and reducing and eventually eliminating all weapons of war are major concerns of the UN, in fulfilment of its basic purpose—the prevention of war. The UN has been a permanent forum for disarmament negotiations, making recommendations and initiating studies on such subjects as nuclear weapons, conventional disarmament, and the economic and social consequences of the arms race.

Negotiations have been held bilaterally and through international bodies such as the Conference on Disarmament, which meets regularly in Geneva. Treaties have been concluded to ban nuclear-weapon tests in the atmosphere, in outer space and under water (1963)... govern space exploration and ban nuclear weapons from outer space (1967)... prohibit nuclear weapons in Latin America (1967) and the South Pacific (1985)... halt the proliferation of nuclear weapons (1968)... prohibit nuclear weapons on the sea-bed and ocean floor (1971)... prohibit the development, production and stockpiling of bacteriological weapons (1972)... prohibit modification of the environment for hostile purposes (1977)... restrict the use of excessively injurious or indiscriminate conventional weapons (1981)... and reduce conventional armed forces in Europe (1990).

WHAT THE UN DOES FOR JUSTICE...

The Charter goals of justice and equal rights, for individuals and for peoples, have been pursued by the UN from its early days. As one of its first tasks, the UN formulated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a historic proclamation of the basic rights and freedoms to which all men and women are entitled—the right to life, liberty and nationality... freedom of thought, conscience and religion... freedom of opinion and expression... the right to work, to be educated, to take part in government... and many other rights.

The Declaration was adopted by the General Assembly on 10 December 1948, a date commemorated every year as Human Rights Day. Two international covenants—one on economic, social and cultural rights and the other on civil and political rights—which expand and make legally binding the rights set forth in the Declaration, came into force in 1976. These three documents constitute the International Bill of Human Rights, a standard and a goal for all countries and peoples.

Many other international conventions have been concluded under UN auspices—on women's rights, racial discrimination, the rights of children, and many other human rights.

The Secretary-General plays an important role in the protection of human rights, through public appeals to Governments on humanitarian grounds and by the use of quiet diplomacy.

Self-determination and independence

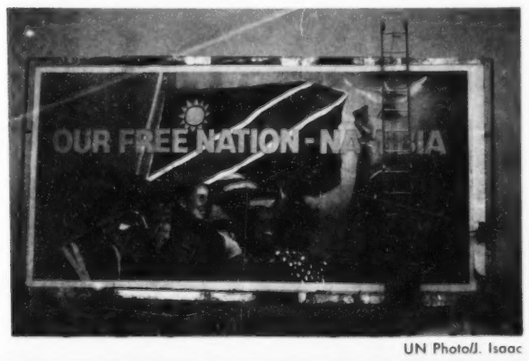
One of the most important rights—self-determination, or the right of peoples to govern themselves—was a goal when the Charter was signed. Today it has become a reality in most of the lands formerly under colonial rule. In the first 15 years of the UN, 1946-1960, some 30 Trust and Non-Self-Governing Territories attained self-government or independence.

In 1960, the General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, in which it proclaimed the necessity of bringing colonialism to a speedy end. Since then, some 60 former colonial Territories, inhabited by more than 80 million people, have attained independence and joined the UN as sovereign Members. Now only 18 Trust and Non-Self-Governing Territories remain.

The Assembly has set a goal of ending colonialism by the year 2000, declaring the period 1990-2000 as the International Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism.

Namibia's independence

The UN has helped bring about the independence of Namibia. It assumed direct responsibility for Namibia in 1966, when the General Assembly revoked South Africa's Mandate to administer the Territory. South Africa refused to accept the Assembly's decision. Lengthy and complex negotiations led to a 1989 Security Council decision to implement a plan for Namibia's independence approved by the Council in 1978.



UN Photo/J. Isaac

In 1989 the UN Transition Assistance Group (UNTAG) was deployed throughout Namibia to monitor the withdrawal of South African troops and to register more than 700,000 voters. At its peak, UNTAG numbered almost 8,000 persons. In November 1989, UNTAG personnel supervised elections in which 97 per cent of registered voters took part. The elections led to the installation of the first independent Namibian Government. Namibia became an independent country in March 1990.

UN Photo/J. Isaac

Election monitoring

In a new direction, the UN has monitored elections in Nicaragua and Haiti.

At Government request, the UN dispatched electoral observers to the February 1989 elections in Nicaragua, and to the December 1990 elections in Haiti. The observers monitored the preparation and holding of the elections. On election day, they visited polling stations throughout the country and monitored vote counting, and could thus certify that the elections had been free and fair.

UN Photo/J. Isaac

Apartheid

South Africa's apartheid (racial segregation) system, denounced by the General Assembly as "a crime against humanity", has been the target of a sustained UN campaign, ranging from a Security Council–imposed arms embargo to a convention against segregated sports events. An Assembly Declaration of December 1989 sets guidelines for the peaceful attainment of a united, non-racial and democratic South Africa, and for all citizens to enjoy common and equal citizenship under the law.

International law

The UN has made major contributions towards expanding the rule of law among nations through its codification and development of international law. The International Court of Justice assists countries in solving legal disputes, and has issued important advisory opinions on UN activities.

The UN has initiated hundreds of international conventions and treaties, ranging from agreements governing diplomatic relations and international trade to those to halt illicit drug trafficking. The adoption in 1982 of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea was the culmination of 14 years of negotiations to draw up a treaty for ensuring equitable access by all countries to the riches of the oceans, protecting them from pollution and facilitating freedom of navigation and research.

WHAT THE UN DOES FOR DEVELOPMENT...

One of the main functions of the UN, under the Charter, is the promotion of higher standards of living, full employment, and economic and social progress. Hence a major part of UN work—measured in terms of budget and personnel involved—goes into numerous programmes aimed at achieving a better life for all people of the world.

Three fourths of the world's people live in developing countries, and more than 1 billion are living at subsistence level on less than $600 a year. While the world's 41 poorest countries taken together have a per capita income of $580 or less, the 25 richest countries taken together have a per capita income of more than $18,000—a ratio of more than 30 to 1.

The General Assembly has stressed the need to reshape international economic relations so developing countries can take their just place in the world economy. By a series of 10-year International Development Strategies adopted since 1961, the Assembly has recommended measures to coordinate the activities of Governments and international organizations in an effort to reduce the gap between rich and poor countries.

The Development Strategy for the 1990s has six main goals: stronger economic growth in developing countries; reduction of poverty and protection of the environment; improved international systems of money, finance and trade; a stronger and more stable world economy; stronger cooperation for development; and special efforts in favour of the least developed countries.

The UN Development Programme

In the forefront of efforts to bring about social and economic progress is the UN Development Programme (UNDP). It works with the Governments of developing countries to carry out projects in various sectors, such as agriculture, industry and education. UNDP is the world's largest multilateral grant assistance organization. With an annual budget of $1.3 billion, it supports more than 6,100 projects in some 150 developing countries and territories. In addition, UNDP-financed activities stimulate some $14 billion a year in follow-up investment from public and private sources. UNDP receives voluntary contributions from nearly every Government in the world; recipient Governments pay over half the costs involved in the projects. Fifty-five per cent of UNDP funds for projects go to 45 of the world's poorest countries.

The UN Children's Fund

UN Photo/J. Isaac

Among the many other programmes working for development is the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), currently carrying out assistance projects in 128 countries. Major areas of activity are immunization, primary health care, nutrition and basic education. Programme assistance expenditures in 1991 amounted to some $847 million.

Other programmes

When countries are stricken by disaster, the UN often helps provide humanitarian aid. Part of this aid is in the form of direct assistance from the UN and its agencies, such as the World Food Programme.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) provides international protection and material assistance (food, shelter, medical aid, education) to the world's 17 million refugees, at the same time seeking durable solutions to their plight.

The UN Environment Programme works to encourage and coordinate sound environmental practices everywhere. It raises environmental awareness, supports environmental projects and promotes major environmental treaties.

DID YOU KNOW...

► The Nobel Peace Prize has been awarded five times to the UN or related organizations: UNHCR (1954 and 1981), UNICEF (1965), the International Labour Organisation (1969) and the UN Peace-keeping Forces (1988). The Prize was also awarded to Lord John Boyd Orr, Director-General of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (1949); to Ralph J. Bunche, Acting UN Mediator in Palestine (1950); and to Dag Hammarskjöld, UN Secretary-General (1961, posthumous).

► In population, the largest UN Member is China (1.1 billion) and the smallest, San Marino (23,000).

► UN Day is celebrated each year on 24 October. On that day in 1945 the UN Charter came into force.

► When the UN was founded, 80 of today's UN Members were territories under colonial rule. The UN helped many of them to achieve independence.

► The UN budget is paid by assessed contributions from Member States. But most of its assistance programmes are funded through voluntary contributions.

► More international law has been developed through the UN in the past four decades than in the entire previous history of mankind.

► In 1980 the World Health Organization (WHO) proclaimed the total eradication of smallpox from the world, as a result of a 13-year WHO global programme.

► In 1991, the heads of WHO and UNICEF certified the achievement of immunizing 80 per cent of the world's children against six killer diseases—polio, tetanus, measles, whooping cough, diphtheria and tuberculosis. The joint WHO-UNICEF programme saves the lives of more than 3 million children each year.

For further information about the UN, please contact Public Inquiries, UN Secretariat, Room GA-57, New York, NY 10017, USA, or the UN Information Centre in your country.